

Report regarding access to social apartments, public services, and living conditions for the Roma and Egyptian Communities^a

1. Introduction

The Albanian Government has approved the Action Plan for the Roma Integration Decade in 2009. Housing and infrastructure is one of the six priorities of this plan. Meanwhile, for the Egyptian community, the government does not have any special strategy, but this community is treated on the basis of the national strategy for social integration as well as sectorial strategies in education, health, employment, etc.

During the months of October – November 2011, AHC conducted a round of monitoring missions that sought to monitor the living conditions, infrastructure situation, access to communal services, access to social housing programs, and access of the Roma and Egyptian populations to economic aid programs.

The monitoring mission was focused on: (i) all communal services that are the responsibility of the local government, i.e. drinkable water supply, infrastructure in quarters inhabited by the Roma, removal of solid waste, cleaning services; (ii) living conditions and the housing situation of the Roma population; (iii) access to social housing programs; (iv) access to economic aid program.

Based on the monitoring and the collection of information, we found that the housing issue for the Egyptian community is not deemed as problematic, also due to the non-identification by the persons themselves as part of this community. This has led local government to not provide for special housing policies for this category and, therefore, in most cases in this report, we refer to the Roma minority.

The collection of data (field work), was realized through direct interviews, focus groups, and visits to quarters inhabited by the Roma. We realized a total of 13 enhanced interviews,¹ 13 focus groups, and 13 field visits. The monitoring was conducted in 13 local government units, mainly those with the largest concentration of Roma and Egyptian populations, namely, Tiranë (municipal units No. 5, 11, 4, 1), Levan Commune, Fier, Municipalities of Elbasan, Shkodër, Durrës, Fushë-Krujë, Korçë, Kukës and Berat.

2. Social housing programs

The "social housing programs" are those programs that help house families and individuals who are not able economically and socially to afford the offers of the housing or loan market.² Social housing programs are classified into three categories: a) Programs of rented social apartments; b) Programs

¹ Interviewed persons: Jeta Seiti, chair, municipal unit 5, Tiranë, Hasan Vathi, deputy chair, municipal unit 11, Laprakë, Tiranë, deputy chair, deputy chair of municipal unit 4, Tiranë, Mirela Shuli, deputy chair, municipal unit 1, Tiranë, Xheladin Malaj, commune chair, Levan, Dritan Cepa, deputy chair, Elbasan Municipality, Roina Luli, Housing sector, Shkodër Municipality, Mene Xhaferri, director, Social Aid Department, Durres Municipality, Gjon Balli, chair, Fushë-Krujë municipality, Dylbere Sefaj, social aid sector employee, Vaskë Thimo, principal, housing sector, Korçë Municipality, Faslë Tota, director, public services, Kukes Municipality, Ms. Evgjëni Pelivani, deputy chair, Berat Municipality.

² Law no. 9232, article 2 "On social programs for the housing of inhabitants in urban areas"

of low-cost apartments; c) Programs of supplying the terrain with infrastructure.

The program of rented social apartments is one of the broadest and creates most opportunities for communities in need and vulnerable groups. This program includes:

- a) apartments built or purchased from the free market by municipalities or non-profit organizations, which are rented out through a social rent contract;
- b) existing apartments, property of physical or juridical entities, classified by local government bodies or non-profit organizations as social apartments, which may be rented out to families benefiting a housing bonus;
- c) objects that are no longer functional, as a result of the closing of an activity, and which are transferred as property of municipalities and have been approved for transfer to a rented social apartments' fund, in accordance with the urban regulatory plan.³

Families that may benefit from social housing programs and the criteria for their selection are specified in the aforementioned relevant law.

3. Findings regarding living conditions

3.1 Housing conditions

Roma minority mainly lives in some areas, such as Tiranë (near the Lana river in unit No. 5, the “Frona Bardhi” street, behind the ‘arrows building;’ in the railway area, Laprakë, Bregu i lumit, the former lumber field in Allias; the former Tractor Plant); Levan Commune, Fier, May 5 quarter, Rrapisht in Elbasan; former brick factory – Shkozet, Durrës; Roma Quarter, Kastrioti Str. in Fushë-Krujë; Roma settlement in the “Radovec Victims” Str., Quarter 8, Old Brick, Korçë; 30th Anniversary quarter, Berat. Meanwhile the Egyptian community is more integrated with the majority population and this makes it more difficult to identify; nevertheless, in some areas are more evident, such as in Korçë, at the Quarter 8, Old Brick, and the Illyria Quarter, Shkodër.

The housing conditions for the Roma and Egyptian communities are generally difficult and about 30% of them live in inappropriate houses. The situation is not the same in all local government units that were monitored. Major differences in housing conditions are encountered between the Roma community and the Egyptian community.

Housing conditions are more difficult for the Roma population that lives in the cities of Tiranë, Shkodër, Korçë, part of this community living in the municipality of Durrës, and the commune of Levan. For the most part, houses in these areas are in the form of barracks and their inhabitants have not benefited and cannot benefit from the legalization process. No appropriate housing can be ensured. Houses located near the Bregu Lumit during the winter run the risk of being flooded and there have been instances of huts being swept away by the river, thus also endangering the lives of inhabitants.

In general, the houses do not have all the necessary living areas. Oftentimes, the same area is used for several purposes. It is used by these families as a living room, bedroom, and kitchen. The number of inhabitants living in the same area varies between 4 and 10 persons. Large families are

³ Law No. 9232, article 3

generally the norm and the space per capita is very small in all local government units that were monitored. The houses often do not include toilets.

Development plans and new investments that are expected to start in Tirana affect part of the Roma houses. Such are the investments made in the new Tirana large ringroad⁴ as well as investments planned for the tram. At present, there is no project that plans the displacement and housing of these families.

The Durrës Municipality features two very different situations. One part of Roma community lives in good houses that are in the process of legalization, while the other part lives in inappropriate houses, built with circumstantial items and seriously lacking necessary infrastructure (*streets, sewage system, and drinkable water supply*). Infrastructure leaves much to be desired in the Berat municipality. The area inhabited by the Roma has unpaved streets and is covered by urban waste.

The construction of the new Tirana large ringroad affects the houses of the Roma community on the “Frano Bardhi” (technological school) street and those living on the river bank (former Allias lumber site). To date, citizens have no information about where they need to move to. In order to realize their transfer, all measures need to be taken in time and the community should be informed. Furthermore, the Roma community in municipal unit no. 11 is affected by the project for the construction of the tram and the community is not informed about their relocation once the project implementation begins.

Also, a Roma community has settled at the Tirana artificial lake park (near the ‘Marin Barleti’ school, municipal unit 5). The site lacks the necessary infrastructure and their presence has caused environmental pollution due to waste.

3.2 Drinkable water supply/ sewage system

Drinkable water supply is generally offered by the Utilities Company in all areas inhabited by the Roma families in the cities of Tiranë and Berat. Nevertheless, there were cases such as in Municipal Unit no.1, 4 and 5⁵ in Tirana, whereby some Roma families did not have access to drinkable water although the drinkable water infrastructure existed in these areas. The lack of infrastructure and drinkable water supply was also encountered in Municipal Unit 1. The inhabitants obtain water by filling buckets from the main waterpipes.

The lack of drinkable water was also encountered in the Commune of Levan. Although the waterpipes are connected, the system does not work and a large part of the families obtained water from other areas or from wells that they also used to irrigate land. Problems were encountered in this settlement also with the sewage system.

Problems with drinkable water supply and the lack of sewage pipes were encountered also in the municipalities of Elbasan, Shkodër, Durrës and Fushë-Krujë. With regard to the Elbasan Municipality, although works have been conducted to that end, the system is disfunctional; in the Shkodër Municipality, the lack of such services is related to the informality of the area in which the Roma community lives.

⁴ These investments affect the area in the arrows’ building and Allias

⁵ Living quarters along the Lana and the “Frona Bardhi” street

3.3 Hygiene conditions

Hygiene conditions are very poor in all areas inhabited by the Roma in the city of Tiranë, Korçë municipality, and Shkodër municipality. The lack of hygiene in surrounding areas was encountered in all informal areas. Most of the barracks did not have a toilet and common toilets or “open” premises were used instead.

The houses of the Roma community in the Korçë municipality are closer to the urban waste collection site. Particularly during the summer, living there becomes very difficult because of the garbage burning, smoke, and the bad smell due to decomposition of garbage.

3.4 Social housing

A small part of the Roma and Egyptian communities in the Tiranë municipality benefited and/or are included in the social housing programs. The families of Egyptians who had settled near the Lana River bank are included in the list of families that will benefit social houses (*the social housing complex in Shkoçë*). These families inhabited barracks, but after the demolition of these, they were included in the rent bonus program. These families received assistance for the preparation of relevant documentation to benefit from the rented social houses. After all this is a case although recently the media has indicated that the Roma community that had settled in the area of Babrru in Tiranë would be transferred to a former military base near the Kombinat area.⁶

For the Roma families, there are specific obstacles and difficulties that do not enable their incorporation into the social housing programs in compliance with the legislation in the force. These may include the lack of housing permits and their registration with the civil registry offices. There are numerous Roma families that have lived for years in the city of Tiranë and yet the necessary documentation has not been transferred from previous locations in order to be considered inhabitants of the city of Tiranë.

Ten families of the Roma community benefited from the social housing program in the Elbasan Municipality. The number of families that apply for such programs is not large because Roma families are not registered as homeless and, in many cases; they have no financial means to pay for the installments/rents of social houses. A similar situation is encountered in the city of Durrës, Fushë-Krujë, and Kukës. 1 of 48 Roma families in the municipality of Berat has benefited from rented social houses, while the Shkodër Municipality is not included in this program. In some municipalities, social houses, for the most part, have been planned for small families and are inappropriate for the Roma families with a large number of members.⁷

The number of applications for social houses has totaled 2,300 in the Korçë municipality, of which 65 are Roma families and 550 are Egyptian families. The municipal council will distribute 96 houses for the applicant families; however, there are no favoring criteria for these communities. The municipality has given 3 houses for the Roma community; however, these families have not been able to afford the loan installments.⁸

⁶ See Shqip newspaper, January 6, 2012, p. 25

⁷ From the interview with the deputy chair of Berat municipality

⁸ From the interview with Mr. Vaskë Thimo, principal of the housing sector, Korçë municipality

3.5 Employment and economic situation

Based on conversations with members of the Roma community, the sole way to ensure survival is self-employment, mainly collecting metal and cans from garbage cans and during the night in the garbage dumping site. Furthermore, a part of them works on the sale of used clothes and items. Working in these economic activities leads to poor incomes and they vary depending on the season, on the work they do, and often on weather conditions. The situation appears the same in the municipalities of Tiranë, Korçë, Elbasan, and Shkodër.

Almost all self-employed Roma do not pay social or health insurance and, as a result, cannot benefit a pension or free health services because they work “in the black.”

The unemployment level among this community is high. Municipal units in Tiranë, in some cases, have undertaken the initiative to incorporate this community in public works programs, a strategy undertaken to boost the sense of work and independence of this community. Nevertheless, these initiatives have not always been successful.

Aside from self-employment activities mentioned above, the Roma community in the Levan commune deals with agriculture and earns incomes from the sale of agricultural products. In Durrës municipality, part of this community works in the utilities sector and partially in summer jobs during the tourist season.

3.6 Migration / Emigration

A part of Roma families living in the city of Tiranë have migrated from cities such as Fushë-Krujë, Fier, Lushnje, and Rrogozhinë. The reason for their migration was the poor economic conditions in the cities they lived in before and the greater opportunities offered by the metropolis to be involved in self-employment activities, which is the main sources of their incomes.

Migration has influenced the worsening of their housing conditions, the impossibility for incorporation in economic aid schemes, the lack of registration with civil registry offices, etc.

A small part of Roma community in the Levan commune and Berat municipality immigrates to Greece to increase the financial income for sustaining their families.

3.7 Economic aid

A very small number of Roma families benefit from the economic aid scheme. In many cases, these families have received assistance and support from Roma organizations, which have helped with the preparation of documentation and following procedures.

A total of 112 Roma families, or 26% of families benefiting economic aid, benefit from the economic aid scheme in municipal unit no. 5. Also, 26 other families received a disability payment. In

municipal unit no. 11, none of the 36 Roma families benefited from the economic aid scheme. These were excluded from this scheme and included in the employment encouragement programs.⁹

16 Roma families and 44 Egyptian families benefit from the economic aid scheme in the Fushë-Krujë municipality. That accounts for ¼ of beneficiaries of the scheme in the municipality. A part of the families cannot benefit from this scheme because they benefited from the law on the privatization of agricultural land. Meanwhile, in Korçë municipality, 95% of the beneficiaries of 1,400 families benefiting economic aid belong to the Roma and Egyptian communities.

3.8 Supporting programs

The territory of Tirana municipality includes several NPOs that offer services to the Roma community. Municipal unit no. 5 has one center that supports the children of this community, who spend part of the day in the premises of this center, being engaged in various activities besides a teaching curriculum. Also, there is TLAS or other associations protecting children's rights that time after time help the Roma or Egyptian community with free legal aid or assistance to register unregistered children with the civil registry offices. The Eden Center offers support for the Egyptian community in municipal unit no. 1.

Elbasan municipality offers services for the Roma community through the community center that has functioned for years in the Roma quarters and is fully managed by Elbasan municipality. As a result of cooperation with the RVTC (Regional Vocational Training Center), Roma girls and women are offered various courses such as on hairdressing, tailoring, etc., and men are offered courses for mechanics, fitters, turners, etc. The associations Help for Children, Terre des Hommes, Other Vision, One More Dream have given special contribution in the territory of this municipality through the implementation of numerous projects to help this community.

Various programs and projects to help these communities also exist in Korçë municipality, such as: project for dropout children, in cooperation with Terre des Hommes; summer camps for children (providing one free meal); schools that also provide one free meal; etc.

3.9 Health services

In general, both communities have access to health infrastructure, but the lack of health insurance makes it difficult to receive some health services that cannot be provided without payment. In some cases, members of the Roma community claimed that there is discrimination or that they had to pay bribes in order to be considered for receiving these services.

4. Recommendations

- We suggest that more programs be initiated to improve the living conditions in all settlements of the Roma and Egyptian communities.

⁹ This program did not result successful or longterm for this community.

- AHC suggests better cooperation between the Water supply Company with local government units and Roma and Egyptian Community in order to improve drinkable water supply for all areas where it is missing and to improve the water supply and sewage systems and relevant infrastructure.
- We suggest looking at the possibility to initiate new social housing programs, which create opportunities for greater access of this community to such programs. For this purpose, should be proceeded with a detailed study for the specific conditions of property, of the registration and the lifestyle of all communities.
- Provide more opportunities for vocational training for representatives of both communities; this would increase their chances of employment and therefore improved living conditions and the employment offices should offer their assistance in employing
- Increase support and assistance of local government units for all applicant families for social insurance.
- We recommend that all local government units inform the communities continuously on all social support programs and procedures to benefit from such programs.
- Ensure better cooperation and coordination between local government bodies and INSTAT and the use of the population Census in order to specify the number of Roma and Egyptians living in the areas where they are settled. This would help better draft and implement social policies in the future.
- We suggest that local government units increase cooperation with the civil society in order to provide as many services as possible for this community and coordinate initiatives to this direction, especially for the education of the children of Roma Community, professional qualification, registration of the newborn children, transference of the civil registration from their municipal unit, celebration of their marriage, etc..
- The Ministry of Labour and Social affairs and Equal chances, in cooperation with the local government institutions and the civil society should coordinate the activities aiming a widespread and equitable distribution of the support and services addressed to Roma and Egyptian Community
- We suggest that municipal councils keep in mind better the problems with housing of these communities during the approval of budget items of the pertinent local government budgets.